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ABSTRACT

Intended for elementary school language arts and reading teachers, this paper presents classroom activities using poetry to encourage divergent thinking and to give children the chance to play with language and to practice English language conventions in order to be effective readers and writers. The 12 activities are (1) combining poetry and prose: (2) starting a personal poetry file based on one's own interest and curriculum: (3) selecting concrete poetry for bulletin boards and visual displays: (4) accompanying poetry with illustrations, music or sound, and pantomime: (5) presenting poetry through student-made filmstrips and slides: (6) choral reading: (7) generating formula poems: (8) paraphrasing famous poems: (9) collecting words and arranging them: (10) making the inanimate animate: (11) generating common forms, such as haiku and limerick: and (12) alliterating phrases with first names. (HTH)

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READING AND WRITING POETRY

Judith Hillman

Besides being fun, reading and writing poetry can give children practice in developing higher order thinking skills that we reading teachers assiduously address as inferential skills, divergent thinking, or creative reasoning. Because school curricula traditionally stresses convergent thinking, opportunities to recognize and applaud other modes of thinking must be carefully nurtured and included in the many learning experiences we provide for our students. Every learner can profit from the word play inherent in metaphor, language manipulation, and integration of reading and writing processes that classroom activities springing from poetry can provide.

This article presents twelve classroom activities, called "poetry ideas," that were designed to encourage divergent thinking, to give children the chance to play with language and to practice the language conventions in order to be effective readers and writers. Some of the ideas are already well-known, and all have been classroom tested and found to be rich in eliciting creative responses combined with solid skill development. These poetry ideas are divided into reading poetry, in which a teacher introduces children to the wealth of published poetry that is available to them, and writing poetry, or strategies that allow children to generate their own poetry as part of a writing program.

Reading Poetry

In this section, the first six ideas are explained:

1) combining poetry and prose;
2) starting a personal poetry file based on one's own interests and curriculum;
3) selecting concrete poetry for bulletin boards and visual displays;
4) accompanying poetry with illustrations, music or sound, and pantomime;

5) presenting poetry through student-made filmstrips and slides; and

6) reading orally, as a choral reading or 2 x 2 oral reading.

Acquainting children with some of the exciting, interesting poetry written for them can be accomplished more easily if the teacher also enjoys the poem. While this may seem patently obvious, a teacher's enthusiasm is infectious and necessary especially when some of the children have been "turned off" to poetry and/or reading.

As a teacher reads outstanding works of fiction and non-fiction to cheldren, the experience can be heightened by adding poetry. Sometimes questions can be asked: Can we find a poem that echoes what the main character is thinking or feeling? Is there a poem about the sea that describes the setting in this chapter? Or, how does this poet's description of an elephant differ from what we've been reading about elephants? An example of this kind of compatibility might be found in the children's book Crow Boy, by Taro Yashima (1955) and the poem Crows by David McCord (Dunning et al. 1966). Because of his fascination with crows, Crow Boy, or Chibi, might have felt the same wild wonder that McCord expresses so well poetically.

Starting a personal poetry file related to favorite books, subjects, times of the year, students' interests, and special topics gives the busy teacher an edge when she/he wants to bring poetry into social studies, science, mathematics, and so on. This kind of spontaneity also demonstrates a value of poetry and an interrelatedness of disciplines that is sometimes lacking. Two sources for poems with proven child-appeal are Poems Children Will Sit For (de Regnier, et al., 1969) and Where the Sidewalk Ends (Silverstein, 1974).

Concrete poetry, by its nature graphic or visual, lends itself to bulletin board displays and artistic endeavors. The display encourages students to try to represent their linguistic ideas in a spatial representation,

thus encouraging an integration of language and space. Children have written about cat in the shape of a cat, made "fat" words fat, and created distinctive concrete poetry after seeing and reading concrete poetry on the classroom walls around them.

Accompanying poetry with artwork, music, and movement can help children visualize the events and translate the language to another symbolic medium. A word of caution here: not all poems adapt to all symbolic representations. Some poems are much more visual than others; they can be depicted in paint, water color, crayon, clay, papier-mache, and so forth. Because some poems are rhythmic, rhythm band instruments can be beaten, strummed, scratched and plucked to add an interesting accompaniment. Taping these selections on an audio-cassette provides listening activities later. A poem such as The Base Stealer by Robert Francis (Dunning et al. 1966, p. 112) can be dramatized because of the action described in the text.

Continuing with the idea of presenting poetry through, or in connection with, other media, filmstrips and slides that children can write on have worked well to encourage an interest in poetry. Commercial filmstrip kits, such as U-Film, a product of Prima Education Products, include the blank filmstrip material, marking implements, and other necessary aids. Blank slides can be used as well; or out-dated filmstrips can be stripped by placing them in a solution of household bleach and water. Besides the conceptualizing that children have to do when transferring a poem to film, the sequencing of particular events is an important comprehension skill.

Last, in this part concerned with reading poetry is the idea of choral reading and 2 x 2 oral reading. (The author wants to thank Dr. Donald Landry, Westfield State College, Westfield, Mass. for this idea.) Choral reading provides a chance to practice oral interpretation: pitch, stress, volume, speed,

enunciation, and so on. Sometimes the lyrics to popular songs can be an effective inducement to read chorally. When done well, choral reading is a pleasant way to experiment with one's speaking voice and to listen for different textures that can result. 2 x 2 oral reading is a variation of choral reading in which 2 children are reading parts of a poem to each other. An antiphonal quality becomes apparent as one child reads the first part of a line and the other child reads the last part, or alternates lines, or answers a question. A poem such as Rain works well, with one child reading works that are not underlined and the other child reading the underlined words.

Rain

Rain falls, showers flowers
Rain falls, we get wet.
Plop,
Splash,
Spatter,
Drizzle,
In the rain, we get wet.
Sidewalks shimmer, rubbers glisten,
Raincoats stick, we get wet.
Spray,
Swish,
Shiver,
Spatter
In the rain, we get wet.

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Landry suggests that students practice first by having one child read each line and the other repeating the underlined part. The advantage here is that children are practicing an event which will culminate in some oral presentation to a class or parents.

Writing Poetry

The following section describes structured ways to elicit written metaphorical language from students. Thus, students are writing poetry with ideas such as 1) generating formula poems; 2) paraphrasing famous poems; 3) collecting words and arranging them: 4) making the inanimate animate; 5) generating common forms: cinquain, tanks, haiku, diamante, limerick, and so on; and 6) alliterating phrases with first names. As is the previous section, each will be described and exemplified.

One of the more famous techniques for eliciting poetic language from cheldren has been the process described by Kenneth Koch (1970) in Wishes, Lies, and Dreams. Called formula poems, students are provided with the first part of a phrase and their task is to generate the rest. For example, a student might have 3 lines beginning

I wish ...
I wish ...
Sometimes I wish ...

and simply fill in the rest with imaginative events. It is interesting to note that the "lies" Koch is referring to in the title are really metaphors. Children are told to "make up a lie" or "pretend something is what it's not" and thus we have a basic characteristic of metaphor, semantic rule-breaking.

Koch (1973) continues his classroom work by inviting children to paraphrase famous poems written by the masters: Shakespeare, Blake, Keats, and so on. Extracting the "main idea" from a poem, Koch asked the children to rewrite the main idea using their own ideas and their own language. The idea

could be cast in a different setting, with different characters and events, but it should reflect the basic truth found in the famous poem.

Another idea used to elicit poetic language from children is that of word collections. This activity starts with small groups of children generating words around a given topic: winter words, soft words, wet words, and so on. Once a list of words has been created, the group can arrange the words so that a "poem" results. Arranging the words allows the children to categorize: that is, to group the words by function, color, size, shape, and so on; or to select significant features such as initial consonant sounds or rhyming words (similar vowel sounds). Alliteration sometimes occurs naturally, and if it does, then it is the teacher's job to call attention to this poetic device. After the words have been arranged, usually sparking a good discussion about why some words "fit" and others might not, the children select a name for the poem and a good ending line. These two features provide closure for the activity and, more importantly, call for a synthesis of all the ideas about the poem. Naming is an important cognitive task because of the synthesis required to do this. It also allows the children to focus on the main idea of the poem, an important comprehension skill. Here is an example of a short word collection written by third graders in Vermont (notice the rhythm of the almost random word selection):

Winter Words

Snow, snow-plow, snowperson.
White, frosty-breath, cold and ice;
Parka, boots, skiis, lift-ticket;
February vacation!

Making the inanimate animate is to teach personification, requiring children to break semantic restrictions they have previously learned. Simply by taking an object such as a desk, or a door, and giving it human qualities of sight and sound can lead to a writing exercise that produces metaphorical

language. The difference between poetry and prose is very slight, usually a teacher just has to shape the poem slightly by putting each phrase on a line. If students have been seeing and hearing poetry, their intuition will begin to give them clues.

Common forms of poetry are found as models in many language arts textbooks: haiku, tanka, cinquain, diamante, and the very familiar and usually funny limerick. Haiku, a three-lined poem with 5 syllables in the first line, 7 in the second, and 5 in the third, is usually about nature, expressed in a single thought or question. Here is a Haiku by a fourth grader:

Do you think of rocks?
Think of rocks down by the beach -
How big could they be?
Asiat, Essex Junction Elementary School

Tanka is another delicate, oriental form that adds two seven syllable lines to the 5-7-5 pattern of the haiku:

Gulls soaring through grey	(5)
skies, strato-cumulus clouds	(7)
Mirroring white-caps,	(5)
Wave-spray against wind-brushed face,	(7)
Ocean day on sailing ship.	(7)

Judy, Edmunds Middle School

There are at least two common forms for a cinquain (5 line poem). The first presented here has the children following directions and counting words:

___ (one word giving title)
___ ___ (two words describing title)
___ ___ ___ (three words expressing an action of the title)
___ ___ ___ ___ (four words expressing a feeling of the title)
___ (synonym for the title). Here is an example written by a fifth grader.

Plants
Green, lovely
Growing every day,
Waiting to be watered,
Flowers.
Cara, Mater Christi Middle School

Another kind of cinquain has 2 syllables in the first line, 4 syllables in the second, 6 syllables in the third line, 8 in the fourth, and 2 in the fifth line. Any number of words can be used as long as the syllabic count is accurate. The structure for cinquains can be defined by a teacher stressing the vocabulary s/he wants to stress. For example, spelling words could be used, parts of speech, participles, or "content" words (related to subjects like baseball etc.). Here are two cinquains written by third graders in the same classroom. Notice the "--ing" words in the third line for both.

Cats
Furry, black
Walking, meowing, climbing,
Nice, happy, cozy, warm.
Playful.

Kathleen, Mallett's Bay Elementary School

Myself
Strong, good.
Running, jumping, playing.
Happy, sad, mad, friendly,
Danny.

Danny, Mallett's Bay Elementary School

Cinquains are versatile and can conform to other patterns. Teachers should consider myriad forms and vary the pattern. By varying the pattern, children realize language can be manipulated and vocabulary development is enhanced. For other good examples, see A Celebration of Bees by Esbensen (1975).

Diamante is another form in which the shape of the poem is diamond-like, with seven lines, and each line has a certain characteristic (similar to the pattern of the conquain). The juxtaposition of opposites makes the diamante an interesting poem to write. The first word and the last word are characteristically antonyms.

Generally it follows these specifications (Tiedt, 1978):

___ Subject - one word

___ ___ adjectives - two words
___ ___ ___ participles - three words
___ ___ ___ ___ nouns - four words
___ ___ ___ participles - three words
___ ___ adjectives - two words
___ noun opposite of the subject - one word.

Students begin by placing antonyms in the first and last positions, keeping in mind that in the fourth line the nouns should show a transition from one to the other. Here is an example showing the similarities as well as the differences between motorcycle and car.

Motorcycle
small, two-wheeled
racing, purring, gunning,
helmet, chrome, highway, windows,
shifting, growling, gassing,
large, four-wheeled
car.

Anthony, Edmunds Middle School

The last kind of poetry idea presented here has no special name, but has been used to show alliteration, modifiers, and the rhythm of language. Perhaps some would say the result of this activity is not a poem at all, or even metaphorical language, but merely word play. The reader can judge. To a list of first names of any group of people, modifiers are generated that start with the same sound as the name. Add any beginning line and closing line, and a simple poetry idea takes fruition. This example was taken from in inservice workshop attended by Right-to Read leaders in Vermont:

On Saturday morning

_____Kenneth
_____Susan
_____Ida
_____Ellie
_____John ...
wrote poetry!

Adjectives supplied by the group were crazy, cantankerous, cunning, ...Kenneth, shy, sedate, selective... Susan, ironical, irrepressible, eidetic ...Ida, and so on. Most children are intriqued with the alliterative quality

of words, and soon make generalizations about words that start with the same sound but not the same letter, thus recognizing spelling patterns, and the fact that consonants seem easier than vowels! Once the idea catches on, sentence patterns can be produced such as

N V ADV Judy jumps jauntily.
Kenneth cooks craftily.

so that parts of speech and their functions are better understood. Sometimes it is wise to talk about the power of words to hurt (some children have been associated with adjectives they don't appreciate) and that can lead to discussions of the power of language in advertising or when used to persuade.

Conclusion

These activities are only the beginning of an inexhaustible list of poetry ideas designed to help children become better readers and writers. A byproduct of these ideas is the divergent thinking and subsequent creative responses encouraged by a teacher. Since creativity is generally regarded as divergent reasoning, or production of novel responses, training in metaphor is practically synonymous with training in creativity, a skill often missing from the lists of basic competencies, yet one essential for growth and change. Another byproduct may be that children and teachers develop a better understanding of poetry in its myriad forms, and thus become more appreciative of this literary art form.

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